Turning The Tide

Brazilian reporters ask a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, 'How can we stop the killing?'

Thursday, March 20, 2008

It was 1 a.m. when I arrived in Brazil's murder capital.

A U.S. embassy worker waited for me at the airport terminal, holding a sign with my name. A man with a graying goatee and a disarming smile, he introduced himself as Edvaldo and escorted me to an SUV that I would later learn was bullet-proof.

The embassy driver headed for my hotel as Edvaldo told me about this northeastern city of Recife and its escalating violence: "Last weekend, there were 54 murders."

"Fifty-four murders?" I repeated, thinking I'd landed in a war zone.

It was my second day in Brazil and stories of murder, crime and poverty continued to astound me. The U.S. Department of State had flown me to this South American country to talk to reporters and journalism students in three different cities. My goal: to help the media reduce Brazil's crime and poverty through their reporting. After listening to the challenges they faced, I began to wonder if the journalists should pray for a miracle instead.

Five weeks earlier, in May 2007, a woman from the State Department surprised me with a phone call. She explained that reporters in Brazil had been reading my stories online about murder victims, criminals and rural poverty. They had learned that several of my stories had prompted public awareness and changed laws; they were eager to do the same in their country and wanted me to share my experiences.

I knew little about Brazil beyond its reputation for exotic Amazon wildlife and spectacular beaches. I soon found out that roughly 45,000 people are murdered there each year, making it one of the most violent countries in the world. Thousands of Brazilians live in favelas, shanty towns run by gangs and ignored by the government. Criminals rule the country's overcrowded prisons. Cops have frequent shootouts with drug dealers. I was heading to the Brazilian version of the Wild West.

My mother worried that I was going to get kidnapped. My husband warned me, "Don't go out at night alone." I asked the State Department for reassurance. A Brazilian U.S. consulate employee assured me, "We haven't lost a speaker yet." Now on this June evening, the embassy driver sped through red lights as we traveled through one of Brazil's most beautiful and deadly cities. Stopping at red lights in Recife is risky. Thieves and drug dealers often drag motorists from their cars, stealing their money, cell phones and jewelry. The victims are sometimes raped, beaten or killed.

As Edvaldo dropped me at my seaside hotel, he warned me not to swim in the ocean. "There are many shark attacks here." "It's not safe to drive on the streets or swim in the water," I thought as I locked my hotel door. "How can people live like this?"

The next morning, I downed miniature cups of espresso coffee before Edvaldo ushered me back into the SUV. While we drove along the river that divides Recife, Edvaldo pointed to the favelas that lined the water's edge. I glimpsed ramshackle buildings, cardboard and wooden boxes that served as homes.

"There often are drugs and prostitution, but not all favelas are to be afraid of," Edvaldo said. "There are some honest people living there. The government doesn't pay a lot of attention to these places," he added. "A lot of children don't go to school. It's very hard to convince a poor kid that they have a future. How you say? It's very sad."

Edvaldo talked about the crime that spilled from the slums to the streets and the violence that had eroded the city he grew up in. He shared a story about a school teacher who was forced from her car at 7 a.m. A 14-year-old boy shot her in the head when she refused to give up her cell phone and purse. "It is very troubling," Edvaldo said.

The more I learned about Brazil's murder and crime victims, the angrier I got. During my travels in Recife, I met Alfredo, a middle-aged man who was assaulted while driving home from work one evening. Thieves pulled him into the street, pushed him to the ground and pressed a gun to his head. They stole his cell phone and wallet as he prayed for his life. Two years later, Alfredo's 27-year-old daughter was robbed in a similar way as she drove to work at 7 a.m. The worry in Alfredo's eyes reminded me of my father.

"I'm sorry you have to live this way," I told him. "My father has six daughters. I can't imagine him knowing that he couldn't keep me and my sisters safe."

The embassy driver slowed as the SUV bounced along the narrow cobblestone streets of Olinda (Portuguese for "Oh Beautiful!"). Founded in 1535, the colonial city rests on a hill, offering panoramic views of historic churches, orange-tiled rooftops and the blue waters of the Atlantic. In one of the city's hotels, I met with 60 journalists from TV Globo, one of Brazil's largest television stations. An interpreter translated as I talked about stories I had written, stories that had changed laws and lives.

ACCORDING TO AN OFFICIAL AT THE U.S.

CONSULATE IN RECIFE, A MAJOR BRAZILIAN

NEWSPAPER CHANGED THE WAY IT REPORTS

CRIME AND VIOLENCE AFTER A VISIT BY

BARBARA WALSH '81.

One of the biggest learning experiences of my career, I told them, was the Willie Horton story. Horton had been sentenced to life in prison for stabbing to death a 17-year-old boy during a gas station robbery. In 1987, the newspaper I worked for, the Lawrence (Mass.) Eagle-Tribune, discovered that Horton had escaped while on an unsupervised weekend pass. He fled to Maryland, where he held a young couple hostage, raping the woman twice and repeatedly stabbing her fiancé.

Prison officials, I explained to Brazilian journalists, weren't eager to give me information about their furlough program or why a killer like Horton was let loose for the weekend. Massachusetts authorities insisted that their program was similar to other states. I did my own survey, calling prison officials in the other 49 states.

"Other reporters in my newsroom thought I was nuts for wasting so much time on one story," I said. "But I learned Massachusetts' furlough program was one of the most liberal in the country. My story outraged people in the state, who eventually made sure the furlough program was changed."

I knew that Brazilian journalists had laws that worked against them, laws that kept many records secret; American reporters, I explained, faced similar challenges. "You can't give up or go away because the government won't give you answers," I said. "You have to find another way to get the information."

The reporters wanted to know how I would cover murder in their country. How would I write about 54 murders in a weekend or the 1,095 murders that occurred in Recife in one year?

I told them I would do it one story at a time.

A few days before I arrived in Brazil, a man had been killed by a "lost" bullet as he pumped gas. The bullet had been fired blocks away by drug dealers engaged in a turf battle. The reporters explained that a lot of innocent Brazilians lose their lives to these lost bullets.

"Who was this man who died at the gas station?" I asked them. "Was he a father? What were the last 24 hours of his life like? Did he hug his children goodbye that morning? You've got to get the details to make his story unforgettable. Your politicians need to be reminded, pressured about these kinds of murders, and this is the type of story that can do that."

I met many courageous and passionate journalists while visiting Brazil. One of them was Maria Luiza Borges, editor of Jornal do Commercio. The day I spoke to her staff, Borges' newspaper had begun publishing a series on Recife's crack cocaine trade. Unhappy with the stories, drug dealers had threatened to kill the small boys who hawked the newspaper in the streets. The reporter and photographer who worked on the series had gone into hiding for their safety. "We are very afraid," the editor told me.

Editors like Borges have good reason to fear drug traffickers. In 2002, they tortured and killed a TV journalist who was investigating the drug and underage sex trade in a Rio de Janeiro favela.

Brazilian drug dealers are often better armed than the police, and like most Brazilian criminals, they are rarely convicted. Though I had written many stories about criminals, killers and drug dealers in the United States, I had never been threatened; I didn't know what it was like to risk your life for a story.

During my five days in Brazil, I traveled to the north, central and southern part of the country and spoke to more than 400 newspaper, TV and radio journalists. Many of them believed that they could make their communities safer and less violent through their reporting. Still, they were daunted and sometimes overwhelmed by the task.

As I waited in the São Paulo airport to fly home, I thought about the father, Alfredo, and the millions of other Brazilians like him who have to barricade themselves in their homes or armored cars to feel safe. I felt guilty about returning to my home state of Maine, which averages about 25 murders a year-the number of homicides that occurred in Recife during a single day.

Now, seven months after my trip to Brazil, I still keep in touch with journalists there. Their e-mails speak of hope and perseverance. Editor Borges recently updated me about her paper's coverage on Recife's drug trade. After the paper's series drew threats from drug dealers, police offered Borges' staff protection for a month, patrolling the building and its parking lot. The newspaper also wrote more stories, reporting that nothing much had changed in "Crackland," where drugs were sold openly in daylight.

"The authorities haven't done much to solve the problem," Borges wrote. "But I am an optimist. I have faith that someday things are going to be better. Hopefully, I will live to see that."

Barbara Walsh '81 is a journalist in Maine whose articles on the Willie Horton Jr. case prompted a change in laws governing the Massachusetts furlough system and won a Pulitzer Prize in 1988. In 2007, she received the Yankee Quill Award.

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